



# CAPTivations

## Success Stories in Prevention

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### Nova Academy (LA)

Students at Nova Academy, an alternative secondary school in Arabi, LA, are learning to "Stop and Think" before making a choice about their behaviors. The first four months of the program resulted in fewer referrals for disciplinary problems and more students returning to their regular classrooms.

Nova Academy is located in St. Bernard Parish, a bedroom community of New Orleans. It serves expelled students from three area middle schools and three high schools. Nova Academy opened its doors in August 1996 as a result of a mandate for school districts to provide alternative programs for disruptive students. The school opened with four teachers and a social worker, and now has eight teachers, three aides, a full-time and part-time social worker, a counselor, a principal, and a part-time psychologist. Jan Somoza, Nova Academy principal said the school tries to keep a 15-1 student-teacher ratio, but are not always successful in keeping the numbers this low.

St. Bernard Parish is a mainly working class community, with a population of about 65,000. Over 90 percent of the population is white, with Hispanics making up about 5 percent of the population, and African-Americans 4 percent. It is an aging population, with decreases in the number of children and young adults, but an increase in adults 35 and over, between the 1990 and 2000 census. The median age went from 32.5 in 1990 to 37 in 2000. The median household income is just under \$32,000.

"These are students at risk of dropping out, and half of them have used substances," Somoza stated. "Now, we are looking at the causes of the behavior and looking at intervention."

This is Somoza's third year at the school, and second year as principal. In her first year, she kept the status quo, which was a punitive system of consequences for negative behavior. The students were not responding well to this system, and Somoza knew she had to find a new, more positive method of discipline. So in the second year, Somoza formed a coalition of

parents and teachers to look at positive discipline programs that would be effective with the school's population.

"A lot of our kids have anger management problems," she said. "Often, we can get them on medication to help them out. If they are on illegal substances, we can work to get them off it and get help. The link that's been missing is how to work with those who

misbehave in social settings because they don't know how else to behave."

The coalition found Project Achieve, a CSAP national model education reform program targeting academically and socially at-risk and under-achieving students.

Project Achieve

emphasizes increasing student performance in social skills and conflict resolution, improving student achievement and academic progress, and facilitating a positive school climate. Project Achieve is federally funded (CSAP) through the Louisiana State Office of Addictive Disorders and Department of Health and Hospitals. Nova Academy is a State Incentive Cooperative Agreement site.

Nova Academy teachers and staff began training in Project Achieve's methods shortly before the 2002-03 school year began. They trained with Howard Knoff, who wrote the Project Achieve program, to learn the "Stop and Think" model of how to respond

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to conflicts. In the model, students are taught a five-step language and thought process which clarifies their thinking and helps them make good choices.

The five steps are:

1. Stop and think
2. What are my choices?
3. Am I going to make a good choice or bad choice?
4. OK . . . I'm going to "Just do it!"
5. I did a great job!

Interestingly enough, the kids have caught on to the language of the program during the school year more quickly than the teachers did, Somoza said.

For example, if students are talking in line, one of them is sure to whisper "Stop and think!" to get the others to quiet down.

Besides simply learning to "stop and think" before they act, the students also are taught, social skills in the classroom. Each social skill is taught for two weeks in 30-minute modules. The first week, the social skill is modeled, and students get to practice it. In the second week, that social skill is infused throughout the academic day.

Successful use of the program is tied to incentives. Students who use the "stop and think" model and show other signs that they have learned the social skills being taught receive rewards such as stickers, while

misbehavior is tied to a loss of incentives. Students also can work their way up to various levels of freedoms and privileges, based on how long they have been at the school and how well they behave. All students start at

the first level, where there are no privileges, and as they show improvements in their behavior and attitude, they can move up to the second level, which allows them to go on field trips. Students at the highest level are allowed to wear jewelry.

The students also have monthly incentives they can earn, usually trips to movies or to a fast food restaurant, or perhaps an ice cream social. Students who have no referrals to Somoza's office for their behavior can go outside for physical activities or play board games.

"The hardest thing for the kids is that they are not being punished," Somoza said. "At times they'll come up to us and say, 'You need to punish us.'"

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But the new approach seems to be working. In September 2002, the first full months Project Achieve was in place, Nova Academy recorded 190 referrals from 85 of its 92 enrolled students. In December, with the same enrollment, only 28 students received a total of 54 referrals.

In December, at the end of the semester, 26 students went back to their regular schools. Nova has a transition program, in which they keep in touch with the counselors at the regular schools on how the former Nova students are doing, so that will help Somoza see how well the lessons learned from Project Achieve stay with them after they leave.

"The most students we have had existing is 20," Somoza said. "but the 26 students we had existing this semester is the largest number yet. It seems Project Achieve did help them focus. They were working for rewards."

For the spring 2003 semester, new students will be entering Nova Academy. With these new students, the school also will teach Project Achieve's "stop and think" approach to the parents, so that the concept can be expanded to the home. These parents will also meet with the principle, teachers, counselors, and social workers throughout the semester, not only to learn about Project Achieve, but to learn what to look for should their children use illegal substances and what parenting resources are available to them in the community.

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#### **Resources:**

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention  
[www.samhsa.gov/centers/csap/csap.html](http://www.samhsa.gov/centers/csap/csap.html)

Decision Support System  
[www.preventiondss.org](http://www.preventiondss.org)

Join Together  
[www.jointogether.org](http://www.jointogether.org)

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America  
[www.cadca.org](http://www.cadca.org)

CSAP's Model Programs  
<http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov>

For this community success story and others from across the Southwest region, visit our website at <http://www.swcapt.org/products/success.html>

